

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

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FM AMEMBASSY RANGOON
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5299
INFO AMEMBASSY DACCA

C O N F I D E N T I A L RANGOON 1537

DEPT PASS AID/ASIA AND AID/OFDA

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PROB, BM, BG, SREF
SUBJECT: MUSLIM REFUGEES FROM BURMA

REF: (A) DACCA 2700; (B) RANGOON 1379 AND PREVIOUS

SUMMARY: THE GUB ISSUED A LOW-KEY PUBLIC STATEMENT APRIL 29 DESCRIBING ITS ONGOING EFFORTS TO REGISTER RESIDENTS THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY. REGARDING THE ARAKAN STATE, THE STATEMENT SAID THAT TWENTY THOUSAND PEOPLE FLED RATHER THAN BE INSPECTED BY THE AUTHORITIES. COL. TIN OO, ONE OF THE TOP GUB LEADERS, PRIVATELY DESCRIBED THE CHARGES OF MISTREATMENT OF MUSLIMS AS RIDICULOUS AND DENIED ANY BURMESE MILITARY INVOLVEMENT IN THE BORDER PROBLEM. HE CHARGED THAT BANGLADESH WAS EXPLOITING THE SITUATION FOR ELECTORAL PURPOSES. END SUMMARY

1. ON APRIL 19 GUB ISSUED A VERY DETAILED PUBLIC STATEMENT ON COUNTRY-WIDE RESIDENT REGISTRATION CAMPAIGN, "OPERATION DRAGON KING", THAT HAS BEEN UNDERWAY FOR SEVERAL MONTHS. THE STATEMENT DOES NOT REFER TO THE BROADCASTS EMANATING FROM BANGLADESH OR ATTEMPT TO REBUT DIRECTLY ANY OF THE ALLEGATIONS MADE AGAINST
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BURMA, BUT SIMPLY PURPORTS TO BE A FACTUAL ACCOUNT OF THE REGISTRATION PROGRAM. AFTER DESCRIBING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROGRAM IN OTHER PARTS OF THE COUNTRY, INCLUDING ACTIONS AGAINST ILLEGAL CHINESE IMMIGRANTS IN THE SHAN STATE, THE STATEMENT ADDRESSES THE SITUATION IN THE ARAKAN STATE. IT SAYS THAT AS A RESULT OF SURVEYS TAKEN SO FAR, BEGINNING FEBRUARY 1978, UNSPECIFIED "LEGAL ACTION" WAS TAKEN AGAINST SOME 1500 ILLEGAL

RESIDENTS, WHILE APPROXIMATELY TWENTY THOUSAND PERSONS FLED RATHER THAN BE INSPECTED, PARTLY BECAUSE OF "THE AGITATION AND INCITEMENT BY A GROUP OF MALICIOUS AND UNSCRUPULOUS PEOPLE". THE STATE SAID THAT OPERATION "DRAGON KING" WILL CONTINUE IN TWO OTHER TOWNSHIPS IN THE ARAKAN STATE. IT STRESSES THE IMPORTANCE TO THE COUNTRY THAT THE STATUS OF EVERYONE BE SCRUTINIZED AND THAT NEW REGISTRATION CARDS BE ISSUED THROUGHOUT BURMA.

2. THE EMBASSY'S DEFENSE ATTACHE DISCUSSED THE BORDER SITUATION WITH COL. TIN OO, MILITARY ASSISTANT TO PRESIDENT NE WIN AND ONE OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL GUB LEADERS. COL. TIN OO, WHO APPEARED RELUCTANT TO ANSWER THE ATTACHE'S QUESTIONS, DENIED THAT THERE HAD BEEN ANY RECENT TROOP MOVEMENT INTO THE ARAKAN STATE, STATING THAT THE BURMA ARMY WAS NOT BEING USED IN CONNECTION WITH THE BORDER PROBLEM. HE ALSO DENIED THAT THERE HAD BEEN ANY SHOOTING BY BURMESE AUTHORITIES, AT THE BANGLADESH RIFLES OR REFUGEES. HE IMPLIED THAT ANY SHOOTING COULD PROBABLY BE ATTRIBUTED TO INSURGENT/SEPARATIST GROUPS. COL. TIN OO ASSERTED THAT THERE IS NO RELIGIOUS DISCRIMINATION IN BURMA AND CHARACTERIZED REPORTS OF ATROCITIES AND RAPE AS "RIDICULOUS". HE SAID THE GUB WAS ONLY SEEKING TO ENFORCE ITS IMMIGRATION LAWS. TO THIS END, TWO COMPANIES OF SPECIAL POLICE HAD BEEN SENT TO THE AREA NOT MORE THAN TWO WEEKS AGO. COL. TIN OO HAD THE IMPRESSION THAT SEVERAL THOUSANDS OF ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS HAD RETURNED TO BANGLADESH RECENTLY, BUT WAS VAGUE BOTH AS TO NUMBER AND TIMING. HE EXPRESSED THE VIEW THAT THE BANGLADESH GOVERNMENT WAS TRYING TO EXPLOIT THE CONFIDENTIAL

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PROBLEM FOR ELECTORAL PURPOSES. HE ALSO COMMENTED THAT SOME OF THE ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS HAD COME INTO BURMA ORIGINALLY WITH THEIR GOVERNMENT'S ENCOURAGEMENT FOR THE PURPOSE OF FACILITATING RICE SMUGGLING FROM BURMA TO BANGLADESH.

3. IN A SEPARATE CONVERSATION WITH AMBASSADOR BEAN, U KYAW, DIRECTOR OF THE MIDDLE EAST AND AFRICA DIVISION, MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, THE LATTER ACTED AS THOUGH THE PRESENT IMMIGRATION SURVEY WAS A ROUTINE BUREAUCRATIC EXERCISE. HE STRESSED THAT IT WAS BEING APPLIED NATION-WIDE, NOT JUST IN THE ARAKAN STATE. HE ALSO DENIED THAT ANYONE HAD BEEN KILLED IN THE OPERATION.

4. COMMENT: ALTHOUGH OF QUESTIONABLE PROPAGANDA VALUE, THE GUB'S PUBLIC REACTION TO THE BANGLADESH CHARGES IS LOW-KEY AND SHOULD PROVE NO ADDITIONAL OBSTACLE TO BILATERAL TALKS. HOWEVER, IT IS NOW UNLIKELY THAT ANY GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL WILL DEVIATE VERY MUCH FROM THE OFFICIAL LINE. BECAUSE OF TRAVEL AND OTHER RESTRICTIONS, IT WILL BE DIFFICULT FOR THE EMBASSY TO ASCERTAIN THE TRUE SITUATION IN THE ARAKAN STATE, BUT WE ARE PERSISTING WITH OUR EFFORTS DESCRIBED REF A.
BEAN

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